

THE HAMMER

The Hammer

Student Arts & Literature Magazine

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The Hammer

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The Hammer is Central Piedmont Community College's student Arts & Literature magazine. Founded in 2017, The Hammer is based in Charlotte, North Carolina.

All visual, literary, and graphic arts herein were crafted, written, and designed by current students of Central Piedmont Community College.

Visual art taken from the Annual Juried Student exhibit, which showcases top talent among our students at Central Piedmont Community College, highlighting the variety and skill in our Visual Arts program.

Questions or comments? Please send a message to the editor at colin.hickey@cpcc.edu

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Contents

A Beast in the Snow	1
Misread	11
No Chairs At The Bus Stop.....	24
Origins	28
Rain Falls	29
Deep Breath	32
Youth	38
Broken Dreams	40
A Past Memory.....	42



Red Light Special (2020)

Chris Carelock

Digital Photography

A Beast in the Snow

by Anna Graham

Snow coats the ground, glistening in the morning sun. Trees stand tall, their dark barren branches stark against the brightness of the ice. With my every gasping breath, a cloud drifts into the frigid air. The forest is silent, no animal willing to make a sound as a beast races through their home.

The snow crunches under my feet as I run, leaving tracks in the snow the shape of my zori slippers. My kimono flutters in the cold winter wind. The small weight in my arms becomes harder to bear with each passing step. Hugging the bundle closer to me, I continue to race through the throng of trees.

If only I could change forms, then I could bound across this forest easily. I spare a moment to gaze down at the child in my

arms. But then how would I carry her? My daughter, whose blood is made of a beast and an emperor.

As I race deeper into the forest, I feel the wildness that surrounds me. This is a place of nature untouched by man. The place of my origin.

I abruptly stop running, sending snow flying up from my skidding feet. There is something here besides me. Something that does not belong, and it creates a sense of anticipation in the air.

I wish for the heightened senses of my other form, the fox spirit. Scanning the forest, I see nothing but the surrounding trees and snow.

The back of my neck prickles. My instincts roar, *behind you*. I lunge away as a dark figure leaps from a tree. A ninja. Two others join. Clothed all in black, the ninja circle me. I have the advantage. They cannot harm me without the risk of hurting my daughter.

In perfect formation, the three lunge for me. I weave out of their path. A ninja grabs for me. I whirl out a foot. He dodges effortlessly. This will not be easy, the Emperor sent his elites, his most skilled.

Circling me, the ninja's steps are so quiet that I do not hear the crunch of the snow underneath them. With a snarl, I twist, kicking upwards at one of them. As he dodges, another one

leaps towards me. I swivel away. Pouncing forward and back, we continue this lethal dance.

I cannot unleash my true power. It would only attract more attention. I cannot risk more of the Emperor's men finding my daughter and me.

A ninja pushes off from a tree trunk, grasping for my shoulder. His hands brush against my kimono sleeve as I fling myself away.

My only hope is that they will tire as well. Then I can run.

A cacophony of noise begins to build from behind us. Our dance pauses as dozens of men mounted on horses flood through the trees. Samurai, the Emperor's men. The ninja were

just a distraction. They plan to overwhelm me with numbers.

An ornately armored man rides his horse to the front of the men. "Yukina! Stop this at once!" the man calls, his voice revealing him to be Ishida, the Emperor's second.

"Come back with us now, and I promise you will not be taken from the crown princess. You will not be punished for your actions." Ishida smiles. I do not bother to reply to Ishida's silver tongue. I may be a beast, but Ishida's soul is that of an Akuma, a demon spirit. I know very well that if I ever return to the Imperial Palace my daughter will be taken from me. She will be groomed to mindlessly follow her father, and I will never see her again.

Clutching her closer to my chest, I shift my weight to my toes, prepared to dash away at any moment.

"You see, men?" Ishida gestures in a sweeping motion to the Samurai. "This traitor flees the gracious majesty's hospitality and steals the crown princess! And when he is kind enough to offer pardon for her outrageous crime, she does not even deign to accept!"

"What point is there in wasting my breath on replying to the falsehoods of an Akuma?" I snarl.

Ishida shakes his head. "Although I had hoped it would not come to this, it seems we have no choice but to take her by force," Ishida announces with a smirk. He hated me the day I met the

Emperor, believing a beast had no place as a concubine of the illustrious Holy Leader. Yet, the Emperor was fascinated with having something that no other emperor had obtained before, a beast lover. Foolish, I encouraged the Emperor's attentions, relishing the abundant splendor of food, clothes, and jewels. All that changed when my daughter came, when I learned of how she was to be used. That her own father planned to train her as a weapon due to her mixed blood. Beast blood from her mother, and divine blood from her father, for as an emperor he is gifted with divinity from the gods.

Ishida lifts his arm to give the signal for the men to surround me. I find my energy renewed. My only thought of

my daughter's fate, I roar, sending a stream of flame blasting forward at the men. Their horses rear. I take off running.

"Stop her!" Ishida bellows over the confusion.

The ninja race past me. I am now blocked between the ninja and men. Kicking in an arc, my fire follows, forcing the ninja back.

Arrows wiz through the air. One grazes my ear, causing warm, wet blood to trickle down. "Careful!" Ishida cries. "You cannot harm the princess!"

Running faster, the trees become a blur as I run.

I am one with the wind. No horse or man can catch me now.

Suddenly I am jerked back, stuck against a tree. Gazing down, I see several shuriken blades pinning me to the tree

trunk through the fabric of my kimono. Struggling, I try to wrench myself free. Appearing at either side, the ninja hold me against the tree.

Ishida motions for one of his Samurai.

No! I cannot let this happen. She cannot endure a life where she is nothing more than a glorified slave.

Walking forward, the trembling Samurai reaches to take my daughter from me. Flame leaps out of my mouth, engulfing him. The Samurai howls in pain, collapsing into the snow. The ninja slam my head against the tree, holding me still.

Exclamations rumble through the Samurai. "You there! Ninja! One of you bring the child to me. You other two force

her to her knees." Ishida commands.

I open my mouth to breathe flames once again, but my exhaustion makes me too slow. The third ninja jerks my daughter out of my arms. The fight leaves me, and I sag against the tree. The other ninja release their shuriken, and bring me in front of Ishida. Pushing me down, they force me to my knees.

Ishida begins a speech on the consequences of those who betray the Emperor, but his words wash over me. All I see is my child in the ninja's arms.

"Yukina." My attention is drawn to Ishida after he says my name. "You are to be put to death, here, in the forest. You are stripped away of all your honor, what little a beast can have.



Your body will not be put to rest, and your spirit will never join the kingdom of the gods. So is the Imperial Lord's command and wish."

Ishida motions for a Samurai, and the emperor's second is aided in dismounting his horse. He strides to stand before me. I am not afraid to die. I take a final look at my daughter. She is fretting in the ninja's arms. The sight makes fire burn within my body, fueling me.

No, I cannot die. I cannot fail her, abandon her.

Unsheathing his katana, Ishida lifts it above my head. As he brings the sword down, my body transforms from a human to a flaming fox. The ninja's grip on me disappears. I jump

forward, landing atop Ishida. Screaming, he falls to the ground. I rake my claws down his chest, his armor unable to protect his middle from becoming bloody ribbons.

Finished with Ishida, I leap over his body. The horses panic, several flinging off their riders as they run away. Other Samurai flee of their own accord. Only a few are foolish enough to remain. With my claws and teeth, I cut down the remaining men.

Breathing hard, I stand in the middle of the carnage, my body aflame. Behind me are nine voluminous tails, glowing with the power of my flame.

The only remaining man is the ninja with my child, for I took care not to harm him. I take in a deep breath, sniffing the air. I

swivel my face upwards. During the massacre, he must have climbed a tree. Springing upwards, I sail onto a tree branch. The ninja tries to leap to another tree, but I shove him into the air with my side. Following him midair, I shift from fox to human in time to catch my falling daughter with my human arms.

The ninja collapses into the snow. I gently land on my feet. My daughter quiets now that she is in my arms again.

Holding my daughter close, I turn to walk away into the trees. As I step away, pain stabs in my gut. Gasping, I look to see an arrow pierced through my stomach. I bring my shaking hand to the wound.

I slowly turn to look behind me. The ninja is standing,

hunched over, holding a bow. Too exhausted to shift forms again, I focus my ability to summon fire. With one final wave of energy, I blast him with flame. He will not rise again.

Panting, I stumble through the forest. As I walk, blood falls from my wound, staining the white snow red. My vision begins to blur, and my steps become slower. I feel myself weakening. Time begins to run together as I walk.

I am coming to the point where I will be able to walk no more. I pause, holding my daughter. I look up at the now dark sky.

Gods, if you can hear me, please, please let my daughter live. She is innocent. She deserves life. I know you do not bother to listen to the prayers of beasts, but I beg you. Take my life in



exchange, it does not matter if I do not heal. Just please give her the chance to live.

A light catches my eye. Looking away from the sky, I see the flickering light of a fire ahead. Stumbling forward, I head towards the fire. Through the trees, I see a little cabin. Sniffing, I smell a human couple inside. I hear murmuring voices of a woman and man. They speak softly, of their want of a child, although they cannot have their own. Kissing my daughter on the forehead, I knock on the door. Adjusting my daughter's blanket, I set her on the doorstep.

I flee as fast as my wound will allow. Hiding behind a tree, I watch as the woman opens the door. Upon seeing my daughter,

she calls for her husband. They carry her inside, talking to themselves of how she came to be here. Of how cold and hungry she must be.

I cannot stop in front of their home, or I will be a marker of my daughter's identity. Sighing, I begin to walk again. I walk until I am numb. Snow lightly falls from the sky. Snowflakes stick to my kimono, hair, and eyelashes.

Feeling my legs give out, I collapse in the snow, under a tree. I am far away from the path, and doubt anyone will come upon me until my body is gone. Reaching my hand to the arrow, I use my last bit of strength to wrench it out of my gut. Blood gushes out, staining the pure snow. My body is too cold to shiver. As

the life leaves my body, it changes from my human shell to my true fox form.

My daughter, who is the child of a nine-tailed fox and an emperor, will be raised by those who longed for a child. Who will treat her as she deserves. She will not have gold and jewels, but she will be free. And, perhaps, one day, she will learn who she is. She could be the leader this land needs, someone to bring together men and beasts. With her power and kind spirit, she could change this world.

Tears slide down my cheeks, mixing into the blood and snow beneath. I just wish I would be here to see it. To watch her grow and become the wonderful woman I know she will

be. But I am thankful that the gods listened to this lowly beast's prayer, and gave my daughter a home. With these thoughts of my child, I take my last breath.



Self Compassion (2020)
Scotty Townsend
Oil

Misread

by Imani Russell

The first time Avil ever held a pencil, she tried to eat it.

Pencils, to her, looked a lot like hard, orange sticks of licorice, so she had been excited to taste its orange twang. There was no twang, just a very bitter wood. The first time Avil ever held a pencil was also the first time she had ever tasted wood.

“No, Avil, stop that! Here.” Her mother had shown her what the pencil could do other than taste bad. Avil had never seen an object make lines like that on a blank white piece of paper. She had never seen what the pencil was capable of. At first, she would only draw shapes and scribbles on her blank white piece of paper and people would tell her that she was “very good” that she would be an artist when she grew up.

That was before Avil discovered she could make her audible words into written ones. She began to split those words into categories: Words she loved—like mommy and pizza—and words she hated—like daddy and spiders. Using these words, along with what she later identified as conjunctions, nouns, and verbs, she wrote stories that made her feel happy, sad, stressed, even confused at times.

Writing her stories helped Avil to forget the feelings she could not control: resentment for her father that left her with nothing but a note and a rotting orchid, frustration for her mother who only stayed with her physically while mentally she was long gone, fear of the kids at school that told her the things



she was and could not control being—skinny, dark, weird—were wrong.

One week, the kids had mocked her smile, then next it was her hair. She liked her brown, curly hair and the way it tickled her face as if trying to lift her spirits up when they were so constantly down. That was what pushed her to write what she did. She never expected the teacher to find it on her desk while she was at recess or to call her mother, her mentally-dead mother, and tell her all about it.

The teacher read it aloud: “Bloody bloody falling red, Muddy muddy-looking heads, Tears and tears the kids were fed, I wish I wish that they were dead.”

It was confusing for Avil to hear those words said out loud because it both symbolized the happiest and saddest moment of her life. The happiest, because she had never—in her short life—heard another person read what *she had written* aloud before. It actually brought emotion out of her lethargic teacher, even if that emotion was concern, matching nicely with her mother’s disappointment.

...This was also the saddest moment of her life...because her mother never let her write creatively again.

But in that moment, Avil didn’t care because Avil did something.

Avil did something with her writing,

Even if it cost her ever doing ‘something’ with her writing again. She never knew the hell of her childhood could get worse until part of her mother’s mentality returned: the rage. Whenever she caught Avil writing for fun, she would take the girl’s hands, place them on the table, and whip them with her belt.

Avil would run back to her room with a face as red as her hands, hands that shook as if her mother’s belt was still abusing them. Soon enough, Avril had deemed her hands cursed and vowed to never use them again.

The whippings on her hands somehow straightened out her back too throughout school. It was only when she stopped being herself that her mother deemed her “good”. Avil wanted

to be “good”, so she did everything her mother told her to. She went to school, got good grades, made friends with the kids who didn’t have any problems, the kids who needed friendship the least. Avil used her feet to play soccer, her voice to make friends, her head to pass tests...but never her hands. They were cursed, after all.

Slowly but surely, time grew legs and ran.

It was not until she discovered the art of accounting that she realized it wasn’t her hands, per se, that cursed her. Something about the routine and simplicity of accounting drew her to it, made her consider it an ‘art’ in its own right that required a very certain amount of empty space in the heart needing

filling. Avil was so sure accounting was where she would be thirty years from now, even if thirty years was a long time to go without change.

They asked for her hands, however, and she wouldn't give them up. They couldn't know the trauma her hands had caused or of her vow to never use them again. Accounting wanted to take so much from her hands, and it took a stern talking to from her mother and her teacher to convince her that it was *not* her hands that were cursed...just the things she chose to do with them. In that way, accounting became her everything, consumed her free time in a desperate attempt to set in stone a future with no pitfalls.

Eventually, she landed in a desk-selling company desperately in need of an accountant; she filled the role nicely. For the next few years, Avil consumed herself with work, went home late most nights, and relished in the prospect of doing this forever.

Chez was the first person to stir her pot, catching all the seasoning buried at the bottom and swirling it back up. As the new accountant at their company, Avil took the man in. She didn't remember who had fallen for who first, just that they were both unable to catch themselves. Time meant to be spent behind their respective desks—overlooking brash white partitions with a hyper-awareness of the microwave's constant beeping as food was warmed up—was instead spent

in the gasoline-smelling air of the stairwell where the echoes of employees stomping in their building masked the pucker of lips on lips. Avil had wanted Chez to be the one, partially because she feared she would never love another man the way she loved him again, and partially because simplicity was the only rule she lived by in life and having to expel Chez from it may rip said life in half.

Time forged wings and flew now.

—And Avil's life was ripped in half.

Chez loved accounting, he loved music, and he loved her... but he also loved poetry.

Avil didn't know what to think about the realization at first,

having had no real experience with poetry other than the tingles she suppressed in English classes when the colorfully-written words were read to her. Having Chez introduce her to poetry was like having her mother introduce her to her father; someone she cared about had strong emotions towards an enigma she had been told to hate.

So, naturally, she pushed both away.

Chez didn't believe Avil when she said she hated poetry and couldn't stand that he loved it, seeing something within her she couldn't see within herself. His brown eyes—ones Avil had once gone swimming in—softened once he came to the realization, and then he told her, "It's okay to believe this for

now, but life is shorter than you think it will be."

Avil, in the heat of this foreign emotion called fear, told him, "I know how short life is. Ever since I was born, I have been waiting for it to end."

Not long after Chez disappeared did Malcolm come into her life and let rest the once stirred pot.

Avil would ask him, "How do you see me?" and he would answer endearingly, unaware that Avil didn't know herself and any answer he gave her would be enough to draw out a, "Yes, yes, I see that too" from her numb lips.

Time flew a lot faster after that.

They got married in the spring. All of her friends and family

had attended, including her mother...

Including her father.

Malcolm thought a reconciliation between the two is what was needed to jumpstart their new journey together. Avil just couldn't understand why they needed a 70-something old fart to jumpstart their anything.

She knew it was tacky, dare she even say *complicated*, to fight with her soon-to-be husband as the white doves flew over their heads and farther into the crisp blue sky, wisps of white pillows cushioning the birds' fall. Avil let those birds steal her attention from the milky brown hands clutched to the white sheets of her wedding dress and the blinding shine of

her fiancée's rigorously tapping black, dress shoes, away from the rows of mahogany wooden chairs wrapped in a hazy pink lace leading up to a gazebo littered with red rose petals, away from the sound of the chefs preparing the food inside the tent and the brides and grooms whispering away about things Avil couldn't stretch her ears far enough to hear. For a moment, she was flying too.

Watching her mother slew dirty words at her father stirred up the same pain and anger that watching Chez gush over Maya Angelou had. Avil wanted so badly to be in on this 'joke' but was also too terrified to try and learn it.

That day, a panic rose in Avil that she remembered having

as a child.

She also remembered the only cure had been writing.

This realization had almost killed her, not knowing what she would do when her only two options were the greatest evils and biggest molds of her life so far.

It took her four more years to decide, that voice shoved within her mind having outlasted the rows and rows of doubt that used to smother it. So, while Malcolm was at work, Avil went out and bought a blue and purple spiral notebook. It reminded her of the one she used to have as a child, the one her mother would rip out of her hands, the one her mother would beat her for having.

Avil wrote those thoughts out on paper, putting down the first words that came back to her stagnant mind:

Bloody bloody falling red...

Muddy muddy-looking heads...

Tears and tears that I was fed...

...I wish I wish that I was dead.

She didn't write again after that,

But three years later, the words resurfaced on their own.

"Why do you wish you were dead, mommy?"

The moment Avil snatched the paper from her son, Passion's, hands, she remembered her mother and almost tried to shove it back in. It couldn't be undone, she realized, when Passion's

face contorted with guilt, guilt she knew all too well. "Come here." She grabbed Passion's hand and led him down the worn carpeted hallway from Avil and Malcolm's bedroom to his own. "No more of this, okay?"

"No more of what?"

It was a question Avil couldn't answer yet because she still wasn't sure herself what made her own mother so angry back then. Therefore, she couldn't answer him, and Passion seemed content with that—

"Your son has been repeating a worrisome little poem at school?"

—until he wasn't. It was years, but felt like seconds, between her seven-year-old Passion then and the twelve-year-old

Passion now, the Passion that repeated Avil's private poem for the whole class to hear.

Malcolm sat beside her in the principal's office in stoic silence, jaw clenched and Avil wondered if her own father would have looked like that if he had caught her that day, wondered what he would have done.

Avil cried a lot of nights after that; on dark days, in missed months, even yearned years, she cried—

—again when she told Passion to pursue nursing instead of journalism, and then once more when he did just that...and one last time when he never returned...and the tears dried up after that; all that remained were the stains sunken so deep into her

worn skin she feared they had mixed with her blood and would never, ever resurface, flowing endlessly throughout her.

Naturally, then, Avil embraced the day the bloody tears came to a standstill.

Lying on her deathbed, Avil realized that she had been taught to live a painful life just so she could gain the security of a peaceful death.

It was far from peaceful...because Avil couldn't help but wonder if a pencil still tasted like wood.

She also wondered what other things she could have rhymed with 'dead' when she wrote that poem all those years ago.

She wondered what her husband would have said about

her writing.

She wondered what her son might have done if she was the one to *place* the notebook in his hands.

Her death wasn't filled with peace, but with wonder that she suddenly only had a few more months to satiate. Time still didn't slow down for her. Months turned effortlessly into days... and she was even running out of those.

Calling for her nurse, Avil asked for two things: A pencil and a blank white sheet of paper.

"The" was her first word, *her* word, a word she wrote only for herself, in years and she cried looking at it for an hour. The rest of the words spilled out of her like water into the mouths of the

thirsty, like music into the ears of a lyricist, like love into the face of a child. At first, they were just words, but those words turned into stories, her stories, ones she never let anyone else hear.

She called for the nurse and asked him for two more things: Malcolm and Passion.

They so easily replaced her pencil and paper. As time went by, they became the things she wanted most in life. Watching them walk into her hospital room, though, she feels how clogged the air is as if it never unclogged from that first moment Avil felt satisfaction at her words being released from another's mouth, that moment she last felt the world imprint on her skin. She clogged herself since then with school, work,

marriage, and motherhood. Malcolm and Passion were still her pencil and paper...but only because they had become things she never really had.

She handed the pages upon pages of tainted paper to Passion and told him, "I gave birth to you 38 years ago...and that's about all I've ever given to you as a mother."

Avil died 69 years, 2 months, 17 days, 1 hour, 3 minutes, and 22 seconds after she had lived.

Her son cried harder the deeper he read in Avil's journal, nothing but pain edged in the pages.

There was a picture taken by the nurse of his mother, ill-looking but still smiling ear to ear, taped onto the last page. Her

last written words were under it:

"Don't cry over this, Passion. I'm not lost anymore. My life may have been misread at first, but it all made sense at the end."



Faces From Artipop 2017 (2019)
Ja-Jan Shen
Clay

The Hammer



Cacti Party (2020)
Deanna Wilson
Oil on canvas

No Chairs At The Bus Stop

By Ana Wengert-Ramos

Right outside there is a bus stop with no chairs
The ache sharpens and scrapes as I'm forced to wait
Until the bus comes I can sit down
But I can't even do that if there's a crowd
When I take the elevator up one floor
When I sit down as soon as I get through the door
No matter how hard I try, people always expect more
Because I look the same as I did before
But every second I stand,
Every step that I take
I am rewarded with nothing.
Nothing but constant pain.
I have stopped eating apples,
I need the doctor to stay

And tell me what I must do
To make this pain go away
But they can't see that. No one can.
The world is built without thought for others
Treated like a chore or something lesser
Accessibility is done only after the fact
But no one will ask if they fear the fight back
You decide on the wrong things
Before you even ask
You might wonder gay or straight
But you won't assume bi or ace
Their clothes say rich or poor
Their style, their hair, will you let them in the door?
From him and her you rarely stray

Because you always choose, not default to they
I want to fight assumptions
Make asking the new norm
Because we are sick and tired of being ignored
Oh I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but why don't you give us
a little lenience
We struggle day to day but you're the one who gets to say
We're too much work, it's too hard to change
Go home and try another day
I long for the day we get to stay
But until that happens I'll just put in my headphones
And turn the music way up loud
Maybe I'll drown out the voices
Who won't stop asking why? Why? Why?

But mainly I'll pretend
Like the grinding,
The aching,
The pain isn't there
Maybe force myself up some stairs
Just to avoid a few stares
Maybe one day I won't have to
Maybe one day people will care
Maybe one day I will go to the bus stop
And maybe one day, I'll see chairs.



Ghost Ranch (2020)

James Crosthwaite

Oil



Slant (2019)
James Crosthwaite
Oil

Origins

By Giang Lee

I am from the wood of the floor,
from rice and fish,
I am from the silence of the night,
the cold that comes with the winter,
I am from the cactus by the window,
The apple tree in the backyard
whose long home limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I'm from karaoke parties and new year's dinners,
from Sai Gon and Vietnam
I'm from long phone calls and teasing jokes
and from finishing my homework before playing.

I'm from work hard and have fun
and don't be afraid to dance,
I'm from family first
I'm from Sai Gon and Vietnam,
chicken soup and spring rolls,
From a brother's love for family,
Where he would sacrifice himself for a younger brother,
Where thanksgiving ends with board games in the living room.

Rain Falls

By Benjamin Smith

Restless wind blows soft
And every breath is moisture
In each one is rain

Nature becomes new
From a single blade of grass
As it slickens, wet

Lightly on the trees
Liquid rests a little while
Still grey skies rain down



I Love Cosmos (2020)
Betsy Gafnell
Oil

The Hammer



Drifting (2019)
Jennifer Bready
Oil

Deep Breath

By Daria Rizvanova

As I timidly stood on a diving board waiting to jump into the cold water, I was thinking about all the practices I went to last year. I remember how badly I struggled to continue swimming in the beginning, and how strong was my will to quit this sport. Less than a second later a loud “Ready, set, go!” echoed in a pool. I took a deep breath a second before chlorinated water enveloped my body. Nine years ago, I had no idea that this particular day would make me want to attend practices every day, and stay on the swimming team for six more years.

I was eleven when I decided to join a local swim team. Honestly, I didn’t feel like it was my calling or something that I really wanted to do in my free time. At the time, I didn’t have

any interest in swimming or competing, but I had been told it would be good for me. I was diagnosed with severe scoliosis when I was very young, and the doctor said that swimming would be a healthy activity for my poor back. I’ll never forget the first swimsuit my mom bought for me. It was an ugly pink one piece suit with a huge print of Hello Kitty on the chest. “Great,” I thought to myself, “I’m going to swim worse than seven year olds and I have to wear this horrible thing to practice.”

Eventually, I got rid of my pink onesie and got a lovely, high quality, Puma swimsuit. Even though I didn’t feel in love with swimming at that time, I started to make some progress, and I made good friends with my teammates. However, there was

something on the back of my mind that was giving me heebie-jeebies. That thing was a professional competition.

My first competition took place in another city, so my team and I had to make an eight-hour trip to a godforsaken city called Irkutsk somewhere in the southeast of Russia. I packed heavily for my trip, including a swimsuit, spare clothes, swimming goggles, my favorite book at that time and all my bravery. As we were on our way to Irkutsk, our coach decided to have a talk with all ten of us. Mr. Naportovich our coach was a friendly, smiley, middle-aged man, who was always buying us hot chocolate after practice. However, whenever he was talking about competitions his voice was lower than usual, and

it seemed that his facial expressions during these serious talks gave him wrinkles around his eyes. “Listen guys,” he said, “I know it might be scary for some of you, especially for someone who is going to participate for the first time in their life. But I know you can do it, you were training hard for this.”

“Is there any chance I can win something, coach?” I asked out of curiosity.

“I don’t think so. These kids are highly-prepared. But experience is experience. Try to make the best of it.”

I would be lying if I said that his words didn’t make me frustrated, but I thought to myself that there is no way back, and I would just need to do my best.

As we were heading to the swimming pool, I could feel my hands sweating and my heart racing. My best friend on the team asked me, "Are you feeling okay, Dasha?" I tried not to show my nervousness as I gave her a quick smile and nod. We walked into the pool, and it was nothing but pure insanity. I promise I could count over hundred people ranging from ages five to seventeen. The pool looked very shabby and unwelcome. Its walls hadn't been painted in a long time as I could see patches of ugly dark green paint coming off the walls. Light could barely enter the facilities as two out of three windows were facing another tall building right next to the pool. However, the smell of bleach was familiar to me and

reminded me of my small but so bright pool I used to train at back home.

For someone who doesn't know, swimming competitions are divided into two parts. The first one is a quick thirty-minute warm up, and the second one is an actual competition. The whole swimming pool was full with participants, so I had to squeeze with 10 kids into a swimming lane to warm up before the competition truly began. The next thing I knew the sound of a whistle ripped through the building, indicating that the races were about to start.

After some motivational words from judges wishing us all the luck in the world, the first group of swimmers went to

their lanes. I was in the third group and here was the thing, before participants jumped into the water, the whole pool went quiet. I could only hear people around me whispering and judges loudly saying, “Ready, set, go!” After that, everyone was cheering for their teammates. Some people were screaming names of someone they were rooting for; coaches were shouting how many meters their students had yet to swim.

However, when it was my turn to step on the diving board, all I heard was white noise. Next thing was me jumping into the cold water. I didn’t hear anyone while I was swimming my hundred meters freestyle, and it felt as if my mind separated from my body. I remember seeing other girls taking a breath

every two seconds while swimming, and I remember seeing blurry faces of people from my team and the opposite ones. The whole swim was no longer than two minutes, but for me those two minutes felt like an eternity. Finally, my arms touched the front side of the swimming pool indicating that I was done.

As I was getting out of the pool, I felt a complete relief. My coach came up to me, congratulated me and shook my hand. Other teammates ran up to me and were congratulating me as well. Perplexed, I said, “Thank you guys for your congratulations. But I don’t know what you’re so joyful over.”

“You got second! Now coach will pick you for the team race!” they said.”

After a moment of relief, panic set in again. "Swimming team race? No way." I thought to myself. Team race was an important part of the competition. All four people who were taking part in it were responsible for the team's placing. I was swimming freestyle; so I was the last person to take the baton.

During the race, our team stayed in the third place out of six. My task was to keep our third place or even try to win first or second place. I remember how everyone was nervous in that team race, how people rooted for their team and how coaches gave advice to their students. Finally, it was my turn to jump into the water. This time, everything seemed clear; white noise was gone and the only thought in my mind was "Swim faster.

You have to do it for other people." Luckily, we kept our third place, and I felt like it was the best day of my whole life.

All my anxiety, panic, and stress turned into feelings of hard fought victory and pride. I was proud of myself for achieving an individual second place, and I was on cloud nine because of my team's third place. I remember how relieved I felt on the way home. I forgot about frustration during my practices and anxiety while competing for the first time. Overcoming my fear and achieving an unexpected second place made me stay in swimming for 6 more years. I participated in dozens of competitions after that but none of them made me experience as many emotions as my first one, nor made me feel as proud

as my first one did. Having other people who relied on me to do my part was a new experience for me, and it made me realize the importance of working with others towards a common goal. Although I am no longer as competitive as I used to be, this swimming competition and many after it helped mold my character as I grew older. The importance of community is something I still heavily value, and competing gave me the courage to have more confidence in myself.

Youth

by Isaac Doll

Nothing is the same
I see you with all your truth
I never let anyone win this game
This is not a welcome kind of pain
The world is ending tonight
As the gates of our hearts melt down
This is our lives, this is our youth
Our eyes gleam with tears
And the neon lights are a bit too bright



Jocelyn (2019)

Caleb Stanfield

Silver Gelatin Print

Broken Dreams

by Isaac Doll

I thought you would stay
But I guess we're all wrong in dreams
I'm just staring at the sky your painted in my
heart
And watching the rainfall
I believed our story would last forever
But we all wake up from the best dreams
Cut the lights out
Take a step into the moon
And let the dawn take us
I'm staring at the sky you painted in my heart
And the lights start to dim
And I wake up again
And again



The Hammer

The TV (2020)
Luis Andrade
Digital Photography

A Past Memory

by Isaac Doll

Do you remember how the rain felt
Can you see the faces still?
Time has not forgotten the songs and laughter
Even though our connections are waning
The sun shines on the mist after a storm
No anger is forever, only light remains
Oh my friend, come back from the shadows
Do you see the faces? Can you hear the music?
Those were our days, life and joy
The clouds came and took us away
But our dawn rises like the first lyric of a new song



Precaution (2019)
Ameer Green
Digital photography



3005003096



Service Jukebox (2019)

Christopher Nichol

Oil Paint

The Hammer

SECRET
SOCIETY
ARMED
FOR
PEACE